

The Probability of Dating

By: Sinnatious

InuiRyo. Inui calculates that there is only a 0.02% chance that Echizen Ryoma would be willing to date him. Fortunately, that data can be changed.

Status: complete

Published: 2009-03-11

Updated: 2009-04-05

Words: 21970

Chapters: 12

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Humor -
Characters: E. Ryoma, Inui S. - Reviews: 291 - Favs: 585 - Follows: 133

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4916487/1/The-Probability-of-Dating>

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Notebook 1

Disclaimer: Prince of Tennis does not belong to me. This story was written purely for enjoyment.

Warning: Contains shonen ai and innuendo. If that's not your thing, please don't read, and also please don't complain about things you were warned about.

Author's Note: Regulars readers all know that I'm a staunch TezRyo fan above all other pairings, but there just isn't enough InuiRyo in the Tenipuri fandom. This pairing has been so neglected. And I think I know why. It's *so damn hard to write* . The characters don't fit quite as naturally together, and the limited interaction in the canon leaves their relationship poorly defined. Outside of the realm of smut, it is a fine line to tread between crack pairing and badfic.

Maybe I'm a masochist. I wanted to try it anyway.

So here's a longfic I've been working on for a while now. It's been scrapped and restarted half a dozen times, full of cliches, and while I'm fond of the end result, you can probably poke a hundred holes in it. (And by all means, go ahead). Shall be 12 chapters.

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 1

It all started after the third girl had confessed to Inui. When the bespectacled data-obsessed high school senior had turned her down, not interested in the slightest, she asked with a dejected sort of curiosity what exactly it was he looked for in a girl. He was momentarily surprised to discover that it wasn't something he'd ever

considered before. While he'd certainly enjoyed documenting his classmates' love lives as they made their perilous journey through puberty, it was only on the very rarest of occasions that he gave any thought to his own.

He expressed this concern to Oishi, who merely patted his arm and said, "You're just a late bloomer is all."

This did not satisfy Inui Sadaharu. He did not want to be a 'late bloomer'. And now that he looked around himself with more interest, it appeared that he had indeed fallen behind his teammates. Oishi and Kikumaru were already well under way with their clandestine - they thought - relationship. Kawamura, though not on the tennis team anymore, was dating a nice girl, and Fuji had courted many partners, both male and female. Then again, Fuji dumped them all almost immediately, apparently enjoying the chase more so than the actual relationship. Even the juniors, Momoshiro and Kaidoh, were making better progress than he.

In fact, out of Seishun High School's tennis regulars, the only ones who seemed to be in a similar position were Echizen and Tezuka. Tezuka because he was far too imposing and serious for any of his many admirers to even dare approach him, and Echizen... well, Echizen was still just a freshman after all, and apparently just as disinterested in the many girls throwing themselves at him now as what he had been back in middle school. There was also the small matter that in the tennis club, they were the only two members who were obsessed with the sport to the exclusion of almost everything else.

It was a hollow comfort. That was why the following weekend after practice finished, rather than stalk the street tennis courts in search of data, Inui headed straight home to work on a new project. One that would rectify what he perceived to be a gaping weakness in his personal development.

He was going to decide what he looked for in the perfect girl, so that no more would he be left speechless when asked.

Sitting down on his bed, Inui opened a fresh notebook and tapped pen to paper in thought, then started writing.

First of all, she had to be shorter than him. Slender, too, but not delicate. His class was filled with girls that looked like they would shatter if you bumped into them in the hallway. Younger also, he decided, pen scribbling across the white expanse. He was aware that some of his classmates had a preference for older women, but upon consideration concluded that he did not share that particular taste. He didn't have any particular preferences such as bust size or hair and eye colour; such distinctions were shallow and meaningless.

That was physical merits out of the way... next came personality and habits. This was a little easier. She had to like tennis - of that there was no question. She had to be smart, too, so that they could engage in intellectual conversation. He'd run himself through a number of popular romance and personality tests earlier that day, and determined that he would do well with someone more quiet and introverted. Preferably logical and level headed too; an emotional drama queen - like that girl who had cried and wailed and *acted surprised* all through chemistry after Fuji dumped her - was a bad idea for a first relationship.

It would be good if they shared similar tastes... on a second thought Inui scratched that one out. The only person the senior had come across yet that professed to like his juices was Fuji, which was hardly a good sign. And they needed to be single, as well. He hardly wanted to complicate any existing relationships.

That ought to be enough. It would be foolish to place too many stipulations on it, and the statistics suggested that relationships between people who were too similar had higher failure rates than those who were complete opposites.

Now he knew. The next time he was asked, he'd be able to answer what sort of girl he liked with honesty and precision.

Although... Upon further thought, why stop there? He might as well try and locate this perfect girl while he was at it. It did not escape his notice that his peers were quickly becoming more experienced in the field of dating than he. This imbalance needed to be rectified as soon as possible.

Inui turned on his computer and fetched a cup of juice while waiting for it to boot up. Once ready, he opened his database on Seigaku's enrolled students. The database he'd compiled contained information on the entirety of the high school's population - physical description, academic performance, what clubs they belonged to and any other particularly outstanding facts. Some of the data had admittedly been acquired by... *questionable*... means, 'questionable' meaning breaking into the school computer system every couple of months to update his records.

He calmly entered a range for height, set a threshold for grade point average, selected junior and freshman year only and entered 'tennis' in the interests column. That ought to be enough to narrow it down to only two dozen or so candidates, which he could then sort through by hand to match up with the remainder of his preferences. He clicked 'search', and only had to wait a few seconds before the results appeared on screen.

There were only six profiles returned, surprisingly. Inui wondered if perhaps he'd set the grade point average too high. He grew further discouraged when the first two profiles he opened were of girls who already had boyfriends. The next one was unfit and overweight - apparently the girl's tennis team had lower standards for fitness - and the junior after was an excitable cheerleader who'd alternated between pursuing Tezuka and Oishi ever since middle school.

His heart dropped further when he realised, upon opening the next profile, that he'd forgotten to include gender in the search parameters. The height limit apparently eliminated most males, but it had caught one of the non-regular juniors in the tennis club, who was incidentally the boyfriend of the first girl who popped up in his search.

With a growing sense of defeat, Inui opened the last profile. The name at the top of the screen was Echizen Ryoma.

That surprise was enough to stay his hand from clicking 'exit'. Echizen Ryoma. In mild disbelief, Inui glanced at the list of requirements in his left hand. Certainly Echizen, still the shortest of the regulars despite keeping to a strict two glasses of milk a day for a number of years, fell safely into the height and weight range he'd specified. Younger and single... He was in the top of half of all of his classes, quiet and reserved, and definitely levelheaded; being able to deflect Kikumaru's and Momoshiro's roller coaster emotional crises with a bored deadpan. And there was absolutely no doubt that he liked tennis.

Remarkably, Echizen fit every single one of his chosen criteria - other than gender, of course.

Inui stood up from the computer and moved to the bed. He needed to think about this.

...

When afternoon practice rolled around on Monday, Inui forwent his planned study of Momoshiro's practice match in order to watch the youngest regular play one of the juniors. Watching the short high-school freshman bounce the ball at the baseline brought on a strong sense of déjà vu.

In all honesty, the tennis club in high school had a remarkably similar feeling to their senior year in middle school. The only significant difference was the loss of Kawamura - he'd quit the club as promised to focus on his sushi training, but still often came to watch the tournament matches and every now and again would invite the old regulars over to try his sushi. By some unspoken agreement, they had all applied for the same school. Tezuka, Oishi and Fuji all could have easily gone to whatever school they wanted, and Echizen too, but that dream - to experience the Nationals again, to keep together

a team that had somehow become like a second family - was too powerful to ignore, and so Seigaku drew them in again.

Inui shook himself from his reflection, watching with mild interest as Echizen let loose with a twist serve. The freshman was easily winning with his right hand these days, only ever switching to his left when confronted with Fuji or Tezuka. Of late, the three of them had proven to be a deadly trifecta where data became invalid. It was quite frustrating. They had some monsters in their club.

"Out! Game to Echizen, five games to love. Change court!"

Echizen Ryoma. Now that the idea had planted itself in his mind, Inui was strangely compelled to follow it up. What did it matter that he wasn't a girl? Inui had never considered the issue personally, having assumed that he fell into the statistical majority in terms of preferences, but it was worth exploring other options. And the more he thought about it, the more he observed, the more convinced he became that the choice was ideal. Echizen was certainly attractive, and more importantly, endlessly interesting once you paid attention. Furthermore, he'd be a challenge. Inui made an extra note in his notebook, observing that Fuji's enjoyment of the chase was perhaps not quite so illogical after all.

Not that he intended to pursue simply for the sake of pursuing. Unlike Fuji, Inui took these sorts of things seriously.

All the same, he certainly hadn't chosen himself an easy target. His pen stilled for match point.

A second later, Kachirou called, "Game, set and match, Echizen Ryoma, six games to love."

The freshman in question rested his racquet against his shoulder, not out of breath at all. "Mada mada dane."

Inui started writing again.

Currently, there was only a 0.02% chance that Echizen would be willing to date him.

Fortunately, that data could be changed.

Notebook 2

Author's Note: Cheers to all the people who aren't even InuiRyo fans but are giving the fic a chance anyway! Hopefully it shall not disappoint.

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 2

Before Inui could begin creating any plans, he needed data. Most of his information on Echizen was woefully out of date, as during the two years before the team was reunited most news on the young tennis star came through Kikumaru and Momoshiro, and was thus unreliable.

To acquire more data, he needed to talk to the freshman. This worked out rather well, as by Inui's reckoning conversation was an important step along the path to dating. At least, that was what was stated in the three different relationship advice books he'd read in preparation for this endeavour.

To instigate conversation, the senior needed a safe topic on which to launch. Fortunately he already possessed an appropriate platform. He bade his time, waiting for a moment when Echizen was alone and unlikely to be dragged away by Momoshiro or Kikumaru for at least a few minutes. An opportunity arrived when the freshman finished his drills early in morning practice. Inui pounced.

Echizen saw him coming of course, watching his approach with a wary eye. When he was only a few feet away, Inui halted and

cleared his throat. This was the first step of many. It would be unfortunate if he were to mess it up.

"Echizen. If you have a moment, I was wondering if you could fill me in on the tournament details of your last year at Seigaku middle school."

The first year seemed surprised - or at least, Inui interpreted the small pause as one signifying surprise. "Maa, senpai, you mean you don't know already?"

"I am aware that you did not make it past the second match in the Kantou playoffs, but I am afraid that both tournaments coincided with our own club events so I was unable to attend and gather data as I planned."

"Che, that's the problem with your data-gathering, senpai. There are only so many places you can be at once."

"A shortcoming I am well aware of. Humour me?"

Shrugging, Echizen replied, "It's as you said. We only made it to the second match of the Kantou Tournament."

"I am surprised to hear that, given your performance the previous two years."

Echizen was silent for a moment, and Inui worried that he was going to have to drag the report out one sentence at a time. After a moment, however, his kouhai started relaying the story in a suffering tone.

"My second year I was first singles, Kaidoh-senpai second and Momoshiro-senpai third. We had Arai and Kachirou in first doubles - they turned out to be a pretty good match - and a solid singles line-up. Last year was a different story. Arai-senpai had left, and alone Kachirou wasn't strong enough for anything other than third singles. There were a couple of decent junior players, but none that were

balanced - pit them against a countering specialist or a strong all-rounder, and they usually crumbled. Ryuuzaki-sensei got around that for the first few matches by putting me in third singles and all of the remaining strongest in doubles, like Fudomine did to Hyotei, but the other schools eventually figured out what we were doing and that was the end of that plan." Echizen paused, tugging on his cap. "Heh, never thought I'd be playing against other captains in third singles."

"You won, of course," Inui prompted.

"Of course I won, but one strong player can't take a team to the Nationals, Inui-senpai. Tezuka-buchou has already proven that. It was a miracle we made it to the Kantou tournament at all with that team of regulars." He yawned. "Ryuuzaki-sensei complained a lot about how it was such a letdown after the Nationals three years ago. She thought we'd draw a whole lot of strong players to the school after that."

Inui nodded. Honestly, this was all information he already knew - Horio had been willing to talk about the tournament in lengthy detail as soon as he was asked. It exceeded his expectations that they'd made it even that far - Echizen had done a lot with the very little he'd been given. That was a problem with many clubs who had too much of their talent weighted in their senior year - sometimes it stagnated the development of the freshmen and juniors, so the school would wind up in a cycle of having a strong club every three years. Fudomine's middle school tennis club was suffering a similar cycle at the moment.

"Do you have any plans now that you're on the high school team?" Inui asked. It would be difficult to segue into more personal conversation, so he would have to settle for keeping close to tennis for the time being.

"Nothing in particular. We're going to the Nationals, right?" Echizen replied with a lopsided smirk.

Inui found himself smiling in response. "I suppose we are."

It was a start, at least.

...

Over the course of the next few days, Inui constructed various excuses to talk to Echizen several more times. While the freshman didn't seem to think that there was anything odd about Inui fishing for information - he was famed for it, after all - it didn't mean that his kouhai was at all willing to share. His lack of progress was slightly distressing. Inui tried to approach Momoshiro and the other freshmen for information as well, but they were even less help. They could give him vague factoids - 'Echizen likes Japanese food' or 'Echizen shops at this sports store' or 'Echizen drinks a lot of Ponta' - but Inui was already quite aware of these vague facts. He needed details. Which Japanese foods were Echizen's favourites, did he still buy the same brands as he did in junior high, and exactly how much Ponta did he drink per day? They couldn't answer these questions.

Echizen was apparently a tough nut to crack. Inui was finding himself enjoying the challenge, but was starting to worry that he might provide the same sort of data gathering troubles as Tezuka and Fuji. Collecting data on his tennis alone was already a difficult task with his perpetually ridiculous rate of improvement, and it didn't appear that gathering personal data was going to be any easier. The first year was not forthcoming on much with his life - most everything the senior discovered came as a surprise. And just when he thought he knew all of the most important facts something would completely blindside him.

His personality was full of mysteries and inconsistencies, too. He'd already noted his teammate's natural reticence some time ago, but Inui became curious when he observed the unusual sorts of friendships Echizen had formed with the rest of the team in closer detail. He was outwardly antisocial, but the mere fact that he succeeded in mooching burgers from Momoshiro and Kikumaru on such a regular basis was proof of some sort of consciously exploited social skill.

Yes, socially he was an enigma. It was a fascinating exercise - the likes of which he'd not undertaken since his one-sided rivalry with Tezuka in junior high. But Inui recognised that he'd reached an impasse. He wasn't going to be able to gather more data as things currently stood.

It was time to start the courting process.

Seigaku's data master was not labouring under any misconceptions of gifts and sweet talk. His task was far more difficult. There were already plenty of girls who tried such tactics and were met with a blank stare when they tried to confess their feelings. And even if he could get Echizen thinking romantically the odds of the freshman even *considering* him were phenomenally low.

It was going to have to be a slow, carefully balanced process. The first step was to spend time in Echizen's presence.

"Echizen! Want to come for burgers?" Momoshiro called, slapping his friend on the back so hard that he stumbled forward.

Adjusting his cap, Echizen agreed, "Sure, Momo-senpai. If you're paying."

"You're going to eat through my entire allowance!" Momoshiro complained. "Hey, I know - Kikumaru-senpai! Come for burgers with us!"

The acrobat hopped on one foot while doing up the buttons on his school uniform. "Unyaaa, I don't think I have enough for all of us, Momo!"

Inui stepped up. "Do you mind if I accompany you?"

The three of them froze simultaneously. Momoshiro in particular looked as though he'd seen a ghost. "Eh? You want to come with us, Inui-senpai?"

He nodded, adjusting his glasses nervously. "I have errands to run in the area, and was planning to eat first." It was the truth, albeit slightly twisted to give a different meaning. His errand was spending more time in Echizen's company, and he was planning to join them for burgers to that end.

They accepted it easily enough, though there was 70 percent chance it was mostly out of politeness. "Sure, you can come along." Sensing an opportunity, Momoshiro called out, "Anyone else want to join us?"

It turned into something of a team gathering after that, as Oishi and Fuji decided to join them also. Kikumarū was suitably delighted to have his doubles partner accompany them, and Inui was similarly pleased as the extra numbers acted as camouflage. He managed to secure a seat diagonal to Echizen's, and gathered some excellent data. The nutritional value of the food was less than stellar, but he'd been expecting as much.

Three days later, he joined them again. They didn't think anything unusual about it this time, though he took a backseat in most of the conversations, not wanting to make things awkward by intruding.

After he'd gone out to burgers with them several times, Inui was confident that he had enough data to proceed with the next stage of his plan. On a day when he knew that both Momoshiro and Kikumarū would be otherwise occupied, Inui approached his quarry.

"Echizen, do you have some time?"

The freshman didn't pause in packing his racquet bag. "What for?"

"Your training menu. I'd like to monitor it for one day to better adjust it for your needs."

"You want to gather data, you mean," Echizen stated bluntly.

That was true, but it wasn't the sort of data the young regular thought it was. "I don't expect that any data I do gather would be useful in the

ranking matches, if that's what you're worried about. I simply thought - after witnessing your last few matches - that your training menu could use some changes to prevent you becoming unbalanced."

When Echizen still didn't look convinced, he continued, "I did a similar thing for Kaidoh. His game improved dramatically as a result."

The first year wavered a little at that. Tezuka had shown an abrupt improvement in his game recently as well, and it was plainly obvious to anyone with eyes that the team's youngest member was worried about the captain outpacing him again. Inui wasn't above utilising that tiny insecurity for his own benefit.

"... Okay then," he relented. "Normally I go out with Momo-senpai first, but since he's busy today..."

Inui resisted the urge to grin madly. "After you, then."

So the afternoon was spent watching Echizen run through his personal training menu - most of it involved hitting a ball against a wall while wearing weights. Inui mentally adjusted his data, knowing that his subject was probably doing more exercises than normal simply because he was being observed.

They didn't talk for the most part. It was a comfortable sort of silence, punctuated only by Echizen's light breathing and the scribble of pen across paper. At some point the freshman tired of repetitive hitting and started jogging around the block. Echizen had very nice legs, Inui noted dispassionately.

After a lengthy jog and a round of sit-ups, the freshman flopped back against the grass. "I'm done for today."

Inui nodded. He suspected that the first year was also planning on playing against his father later in the evening, but had no way of confirming that suspicion. "Very good. I already have several ideas to balance out your menu nicely." He cleared his throat. "Are you still drinking two glasses of milk a day?"

He was met with a vaguely guilty expression.

"I take it you haven't been keeping to it regularly, then." Inui made a note in his book.

Echizen frowned. "It's not like I'm that short."

"You've only put on five inches over the past three years, bringing your height to... five feet four inches."

The frown transformed into a scowl.

"The milk will help," Inui assured. "Trust me."

The freshman sighed, shoulders slumping. "Che. Fine."

"I'll leave you to it, then," Inui announced, shutting his notebook with a snap. "I'll review the data tonight, and have a revised training schedule for you tomorrow."

Echizen stared at him. In the setting sun, his eyes took on a golden hue. Inui was intrigued by the observation. "Ok. Thanks, senpai."

Notebook 3

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 3

Inui leant back in his chair, folding his hands as he considered the past couple of weeks. Yes, things were progressing nicely. He'd increased his visibility significantly. The chances of Echizen being willing to date him hadn't shifted more than 0.1 of a percent, but that was still acceptable. This was necessary groundwork.

It was time to start the second phase of his plan.

The next day after practice, Inui approached his quarry casually. "Echizen, I was wondering if you might have some time free this afternoon."

The freshman spared his senior a dubious glance. "More training menu stuff?"

Clearing his throat, he replied, "Actually, no. Though has the new menu been working well for you so far?"

"Hm."

Inui took that as confirmation. "I'm glad to hear it. Actually, I'm here today to ask a somewhat unusual favour."

That got his attention. Echizen actually paused in drinking his Ponta to listen.

"You see, I've been doing an extra-credit assignment in English that's due in a few days. It's a bit above the usual standard of the class, so I struggled with it in some parts. I was hoping I could ask you to proof-read it for me, and possibly give me some pointers on how it could be improved."

"You're asking a freshman to check your homework, senpai?" Echizen asked with a cocky smirk.

"It is a well-known fact that you are the top of your grade in English. From your time in America, it is not unreasonable to assume that you're fluent. I expect that asking you would be more beneficial than asking any of my classmates. Of course, if you have other commitments, I understand."

"Che, seems like an unfair deal to me, senpai. You get extra credit in English and I lose my afternoon."

Inui resisted the urge to smile. He had actually counted on Echizen to bargain. "I thought of this. That's why if you're willing to help me out, I'll treat you to sushi afterwards."

That stopped the first-year cold. Echizen raised a speculative eyebrow. "Really?"

"Of course. It's only fair. It's quite a long assignment."

He remained patient while his kouhai thought the offer through. There was a 95 percent chance he would take him up on the deal. Inui knew it was going to be expensive, but it was an essential move to get the freshman used to hanging around him one-on-one in a social context, rather than just when tennis or academics were involved.

"Okay then," he relented.

"I'll wait here until you're finished getting changed," Inui offered.

Ten minutes later they were walking through the streets towards the senior's house. Inui was inordinately pleased with how his plan was progressing so far. He kept the conversation impersonal and focused on the safe topic of tennis as they travelled.

"I've been thinking that we ought to do more weight training specifically with your right arm."

"I already play with it a fair bit already," Echizen pointed out sourly.

"That is true, but I've observed that you perform the majority of your day-to-day tasks with your left hand. You might not notice this, but this is the primary reason why your dominant hand is always the stronger of the two. Those little tasks add up to be a lot of extra exercise during the day."

"So I should try and do them with my right hand instead? Wouldn't that make my left weaker eventually?"

"I think some extra weight training with your right hand every day should do it. I'll make the necessary adjustments to your training schedule. It should greatly increase the effectiveness of your Nitouryuu."

"Hmmm," Echizen hummed at that, idly kicking a pebble in front of him as he walked.

"Although I suppose that there aren't many players in the high school circuit that it's useful against," Inui conceded. Ibu Shinji had transferred to a school in Hokkaido - if they did come across him again, it wouldn't be until the Nationals.

Echizen shrugged. "It's sort of a party trick now. Although the extra reach comes in handy sometimes."

"Party trick? Interesting term."

"You know. Exhibition tennis," Echizen explained airily, waving his hand in a dismissive manner. His opinion on purely exhibition tennis was pretty obvious, but Inui could have figured that out on his own. Tennis was tennis - whether spectators were there or not didn't matter to the freshman in the slightest.

In a relatively short period of time, they made it to his house. Inui unlocked the door and ushered his guest inside. "My room is this way. Would you like anything to drink first?"

When Echizen flinched, he hastily amended, "We have some Ponta, if you'd like. It's not the grape kind..." The Ponta had been bought specifically for this purpose, but Inui had deliberately avoided purchasing the grape flavour. Evidence of too much prior planning would look suspicious.

Thinking that over, the freshman nodded. Inui fetched two cans of orange Ponta and led the way to his room, shouldering the door open. "You can put your bag anywhere."

"Your room is kind of... normal," Echizen remarked as he entered, sounding dubious.

"What were you expecting?"

He shrugged, dropping his bag to ground. Inui could guess. He'd overheard plenty of wild speculations about what his bedroom might look like in the clubhouse, most of which described it as something of a mad scientist's laboratory. "So..."

"Right." Inui headed over to the desk, shuffling through several piles of papers and withdrawing the hand-written assignment. "This is just the draft. Feel free to write in the margins." He offered a red pen with the essay.

Echizen plucked the paper and pen from his hands and flopped down on the floor, resting his back against the bed. He glanced at

the title and first few sentences, and then arched an eyebrow. "Your essay is on cats?"

The choice of topic was not coincidental. "I was instructed to write about either an occupation or an animal. Cats seemed like a good choice." He adjusted his glasses. "Oh, you have a cat, don't you Echizen? Perhaps you might be able to add some extra insight, then."

Echizen nodded distractedly, eyes quickly scanning the paper. Inui had already completed the work of course, and even deliberately included some mistakes in the essay to be fixed. He was then slightly embarrassed when the freshman not only picked up on those mistakes, but also found a dozen more.

"Spelt 'veterinary' wrong, 'spinal' wrong, 'balance' wrong, and that letter should be capitalised..." he muttered, pen darting across the paper, drawing a forest of crimson words and corrections in the margins.

In less than ten minutes, Echizen had completed going through the essay that took Inui several days to compose.

That was one thing he hadn't planned. He managed to draw it out a little longer by asking for clarification on some parts, but even that only took another twenty minutes or so. To Inui's surprise, he actually learned quite a bit. English was hardly his worst subject - Home Economics held that dubious honour - but the difference between someone who was still learning and someone who spoke fluently was startling. He was perhaps just a little bit impressed.

He tidied the papers and set them carefully to the side of his desk for more thorough scrutiny later. "Thank you for your help."

"Che, it was nothing," Echizen dismissed with a yawn.

"It didn't take as long as I anticipated. It's still early - did you want the sushi now, or would you prefer to wait until another day?"

"Today," was the decisive response. "I'm hungry now."

Inui glanced at the clock. "I don't think Kawamura's is open yet, but if we walk the long way we should get there at a good time."

It was a pleasant afternoon, and it was nice to just walk outside. The senior took them past where Kaidoh normally trained in the river, relating the story of the boomerang snake training. Echizen looked interested, at which point he cautioned the freshman to hold off on trying that training until he'd grown taller - it wouldn't benefit someone with such short reach nearly as much. He was answered with a scowl, but the data-gatherer could practically see the information being mentally filed away for future use.

Kawamura Sushi was just opening for their evening hours when they arrived. "Inui!... And Echizen?" Kawamura greeted them, surprised and not just a little confused.

"Inui-senpai is treating," Echizen remarked smugly, sliding onto a stool.

"In exchange for his assistance with the English paper," Inui explained, settling himself onto a stool next to the smaller boy.

"Ah." Kawamura face relaxed as he handed them the menu - though there was no real need, as they frequented the shop often enough to know the specialities by heart over the years. He sent Inui a sympathetic glance. "I'll see if I can't convince my father to give you a discount."

"I don't mind," Inui assured him. It wouldn't be beneficial to appear a cheapskate in front of Echizen.

"How's the team doing?" Kawamura asked after they'd ordered.

"Fuji has not been keeping you informed? I was relatively certain..."

"He doesn't talk about tennis much these days." Kawamura looked a bit sheepish. "I think he thinks it upsets me or something."

"Does it?" Echizen asked bluntly.

"I admit that I missed being on the team, in my freshman year especially. But I made this choice, and it's been over two years now. I'm used to it. I still play in the odd local tournament for fun, too. But I guess Fujiko doesn't believe me..."

"I see. The team is doing well, don't you think Echizen?"

The freshman yawned. "I guess so." His eyes glinted. "We're definitely going to Nationals again. You have to come watch, Kawamura-senpai."

He laughed good-naturedly at the order. "I'll make sure of it."

Kawamura sat and chatted with them until their food arrived and he had to divert his attention to other customers.

They remained silent while they ate. Inui had already noticed Echizen's lack of enthusiasm for most forms of conversation - why he hung out with Momoshiro was anybody's guess - and was pleased to discover that the silence was a comfortable one. It was certainly a better option than wearing out the few safely impersonal avenues of conversation he had left at his disposal.

Twilight was just setting in when they finished. They bade farewell to Kawamura and headed outside. It was time to part ways. Inui found himself reluctant, but he wouldn't make anymore progress that day.

"I'll walk you home," he offered.

Echizen waved him off. "It's not that far from here. See you at practice tomorrow, senpai. And thanks for the sushi."

"I should be thanking you for the assistance."

Echizen just smirked and walked away. Inui watched him go, mildly surprised to realise that he'd sort of enjoyed the afternoon. Certainly that was the goal, but he hadn't expected to actually take pleasure in the process having both his wallet and essay ripped to shreds.

All in all, great progress was made. Inui was anxious to head home and start re-working his percentages.

Notebook 4

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 4

Twice more Inui solicited Echizen's assistance with English in exchange for sushi. Kawamura might have thought it a bit weird that his classmate was suddenly so keen on improving his already quite good English marks, but thankfully didn't comment or spread news of it around.

His next move was actually unplanned. He'd been getting dressed in the clubhouse with the other regulars when he overheard Momoshiro and Echizen talking.

"Not coming for burgers?"

Echizen heaved a suffering sigh. "I've got a lab practical tomorrow I have to prepare for."

"What? You don't need to do anything for that!" Momoshiro jibed. "C'mon, we'll even keep it short."

The freshman scowled, zipping up his racket bag. "My mother gave me a lecture over my marks on the last one."

Momoshiro scratched the back of his head. "Oh wow. That sucks. Hey, Eiji-senpai!"

Sensing an opportunity, Inui approached. "Echizen, I didn't mean to eavesdrop..."

Rolling his eyes, the first-year slung his bag over his shoulder. "Yes you did, senpai."

He had him there. "Yes well... I thought that perhaps since you've been assisting me with English so much, I might return the favour."

He was met with a blank stare. "Ha?"

"Science labs is one of your worst subjects, isn't it?" Inui asked. "It happens to be one of my best."

Echizen looked thoughtful, and then regarded him suspiciously. "You already paid me back with the sushi, though. It's not worth buying sushi for." He was right; a 'worst subject' for Echizen was still a comfortable pass.

Inui adjusted his glasses. "I wasn't looking for anything in return. I merely thought that I should be a good senpai and offer."

The senior was 78 percent certain that Echizen would turn down his offer - after all, the freshman was notoriously proud and rarely asked for help. So it was a surprise when he shifted the racquet bag on his shoulder and nodded. "... Okay senpai. At the labs?"

Inui was still privately reeling from the surprise. It took him a moment to reply. "My house will be more convenient. I have all the necessary equipment, and the kitchen is set up for it."

"Alright." Echizen regarded him suspiciously again. "You're not going to make any weird juices, are you?"

It was an entertaining notion, but hardly the way to endear the first-year to him. "None of my special drinks."

"Not even as 'motivation'?" he asked dubiously.

"I'm actually all out," he admitted. "I haven't had the opportunity to restock after yesterday's practice."

Echizen relaxed. "Okay then. Let's go."

So that afternoon Inui found himself with his chemistry set in his kitchen explaining proper measuring practices to the freshman. Considering it had not been a step in his carefully laid out plan, it was progressing rather well.

"Look closely there. The liquid will form a meniscus. Both convex and concave, it doesn't matter - you record the value at the centre of the curve rather than the edges."

"Right." Echizen peered at the tube, scrawling nearly indecipherable notes down. Inui kept half an eye on them, more interested in analysing handwriting than their actual contents.

It was a pleasant change from the previous study sessions. Inui felt far more in control, and was perhaps even preening a little at being able to showcase his skill in something for once without his kouhai immediately surpassing him. And Echizen was a surprisingly attentive student. Inui had pegged him as rather lazy, but then, how many times did the freshman contradict his data on a daily basis? The senior was almost tempted to throw his notebook out the window and be done with it.

"With the weight, it's to the third decimal point?"

Snapping back to attention, Inui replied, "In your current coursework, yes. Unless it's otherwise specified. Be sure to read the criteria carefully."

The freshman nodded, hunching over his paper to write down the numbers, glancing back and forth between his notebook and the digital display. His look of concentration was sort of cute, Inui observed. The thought surprised him, and he spent a moment analysing it. Yes, it was quite enjoyable watching Echizen work.

This was natural, he concluded. It was only appropriate that he find Echizen's expression cute given his intentions.

Perhaps it was because he was enjoying himself, but it seemed like the afternoon passed very quickly. All too soon they were clearing up and packing everything away. For someone who claimed that practical science was his worst subject, it didn't seem as though the first-year particularly struggled with it. Inui suspected it was just an attention span issue - the subject probably didn't interest him, so he likely didn't take care or pay attention, which was what practical science was all about. After all, Echizen was an incredibly fast learner. It still baffled them all how he'd managed to go from being a complete beginner at billiards to nearly as good as Fuji in the space of one game. It was part of what made him so frightening on the tennis court.

They were in the middle of packing away the last of the equipment when it happened. Echizen had picked up a test tube, but as he did so Inui accidentally jostled his elbow as he reached for the scales. They both froze as the fragile glass tube slipped through his fingers and fell as though in slow motion to the floor. With an almost delicate tinkle, it shattered into dozens of tiny pieces.

They both immediately crouched down. "Sorry Inui-senpai." Echizen's tone was flat, but the wideness of his eyes betrayed his surprise. He hurriedly started picking up the biggest pieces of broken glass.

"It was my fault for bumping you," Inui assured him, and gently grabbed the hand that was picking up the glass. "Don't. It's sharp - you could cut yourself." Cradling the hand, he paused for a moment, mildly consternated at how small it seemed. It shouldn't have been a surprise - he was already quite aware of the approximate size of Echizen's hand - but held in his own like that the difference felt more profound.

Echizen cleared his throat, and shifted slightly. The senior carefully turned the palm over to dump the glass shards into his own hand before letting go. Their fingers brushed briefly as he moved his hand away, and Inui suddenly felt self-conscious at the unintended intimacy of the gesture.

It appeared he was not alone. Echizen retracted his hand swiftly, and the awkward moment lingered in the air.

That was an element of his plan Inui had not yet considered. They would need to develop some form of skin-ship. It would be difficult to progress unless he could get the freshman to feel as comfortable touching him as he did Momoshiro and Kikumaru. It would be hard - neither he nor Echizen were particularly affectionate people - but who had ever heard of a couple that balked at holding hands?

He carefully deposited the glass in the bin, and fetched a dustpan to clean up the rest of the fragments while Echizen busied himself by putting the remainder of the equipment away.

"That's everything, then," he confirmed.

"Should I replace the test tube?" Echizen asked.

The data gatherer waved it off. "I have plenty. They break easily."

"Okay. I should get going then."

Inui saw him to the foyer. Earlier awkwardness already forgotten, Echizen slid his feet into his shoes. "Thanks for your help, Inui-senpai."

"It's no trouble. If you ever feel that you might benefit from some tutoring of any kind just ask. That's what senpai are for."

"Che, and free sushi, you mean."

It took Inui a moment to realise that he was joking. His face stretched into a smile. "That too."

Echizen headed down the front path, waving lazily once without even bothering to turn around.

As soon as he was gone, Inui headed upstairs to record down the afternoon's data. The encounter had shown him a multitude of

weaknesses in his approach and areas he needed to consider if he were to progress. He did not yet have sufficient data to decide on his next step, however. He needed to buy more magazines. Perhaps he ought to try some with an alternative target demographic - maybe the 18-20 female age set instead of the 14-16 range? - for a wider point of view. Yes, that should provide ample material. There were plans that needed to be made.

Inui was excited. The entire afternoon had been wholly unplanned, but it had proven more beneficial than all of his previous schemes combined.

Notebook 5

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 5

" Inui-senpai."

" Ah! Inui-senpai... There-!"

Inui blinked. Darkness. He reached up, and tugged his eye-mask off. The harsh glare of sunlight had him closing his eyes again while he felt around for his glasses.

He lay in bed for several minutes. There was still some time before his alarm sounded and he would need to begin his morning routine. He mentally rearranged it for an extra few minutes in the shower that morning.

It was only natural, he reasoned. Healthy, even. He was of the appropriate age. He didn't understand why he was so surprised to have a dream of... that nature. Or why he was so surprised it was about Echizen. It only made sense - his thoughts had been largely centred on his underclassman for the past few weeks.

It was the end goal. His subconscious was giving him affirmation. There was no reason to be embarrassed.

Yet when his mind's eye flicked back to those bare shoulder blades and pale thighs, his tongue started to feel thick in his mouth and his stomach twisted into coils.

Yes. Definitely shower time.

He actually wound up arriving at practice that morning *later* than Echizen, which was a first. Tezuka gave them both laps, and Echizen smirked at him. It was a fantastic opportunity, but Inui found himself unable to do anything other than fight down the blush threatening to colour his face.

He estimated a nine percent drop in his usual performance during that morning practice. The freshman's mere presence was an enormous distraction - it wasn't until their drills took them to different courts that the data-gatherer was finally able to focus properly.

This was terrible. He needed to get himself sorted before practice that afternoon if he were to initiate his plans.

Needless to say, his performance in class was a further fifteen percent worse than his attentiveness in morning practice. However, by the time afternoon practice rolled around, Inui was confident he would be able to execute his carefully laid plans without a hitch.

The data-gatherer meticulously measured the length of the racquet handle, and then handed it back to Kaidoh. "Just your regular grip next, please."

Kaidoh obliged. "Fsssshuuu, what's this even for, senpai?"

"A survey of a number of variables relating to grip. All of the Regulars have textbook grips, but I'm trying to discover any hidden correlations between factors such as handle width, finger length, joint angles, that sort of thing," Inui remarked offhandedly, jotting several short notes in his book. He turned the racquet over, and measured each of Kaidoh's fingers. The junior remained silent, though it was plainly visible that he was anxious to get back to training.

"That should be all, thank you Kaidoh. Echizen, you're next. Do you mind?"

The first-year sullenly handed over his racquet. "You collect weird data, senpai."

Granted, it was a little stranger than his normal data-collecting habits, but he was genuinely interested in finding any correlations, and if it helped him along the path to his ultimate goal, so much the better. Inui measured the handle length and diameter, made a note of the texture of the tape, then handed the racquet back. "Your preferred grip, please."

Echizen held the racquet out. Inui gently took a hold of the hand, pressing lightly on each finger and taking just a little longer than necessary to perform his measurements. "Your knuckles are quite interesting," he remarked, running his fingers between the smooth bumps on the freshman's hand.

"What's weird about my knuckles?" Echizen asked, sounding slightly distracted. His eyes kept tracking the path of Inui's fingers.

"Nothing especially." The senior suddenly felt awkward. "They're just... very nice," he finished lamely. Desperately fishing for something to give proper context to his comment, he blurted, "You have a similar hand type to Fuji, but his knuckles are uneven."

"Did you say something about me, Inui? How interesting," Fuji remarked from the next court over. His expression was merry, but the data-gatherer felt a brief chill.

"Right hand as well, if you wouldn't mind," Inui requested, eager to change the subject.

"Che, no one else had to," Echizen complained, switching the racquet to his right hand and holding it out.

"No one else is ambidextrous to the same degree." Inui repeated the process with the right hand, again holding it just a little longer than he needed to. Absently, he massaged the back of the hand with his thumb, then stopped when he realised what he was doing.

Echizen was starting to sport a faint blush, and the senior had the horrible suspicion that he was too. That strange warm feeling was beginning to pool in his stomach again.

Hurriedly, he dropped the hand and wrote down several notes. "Excellent. Thank you very much for your help, Echizen."

The freshman shuffled back to practice. Inui tried to calm the sudden rush of adrenaline in his system. What was wrong with him? His reactions were irrational and jeopardising the next stage of his plan!

He took several deep breaths, casting an analytical eye over the data he'd just collected. The familiar act of mentally sorting and cataloguing the information helped settle his nerves.

Right. He probably had a handle on his own embarrassment now. This was natural, after all. He was merely catching up to his more experienced classmates.

Still, Echizen wasn't quite as embarrassed by simply touching hands as he had been when the test tube broke. It was progress. A very small amount of progress, but progress none-the-less.

However, he wasn't quite finished for the day. His glasses glinted in the afternoon sun as he headed over to the court Momoshiro was doing his drills on.

Ten minutes later, Tezuka called practice to a close. The regulars started to warm down, following the list of stretches and exercises the data-gatherer had outlined the week before. Inui cautiously approached his target and cleared his throat.

"What is it, senpai?"

"I was just wondering if you needed someone to help with your stretches," Inui stated.

Echizen frowned. "Normally I do them with Momo-senpai..." He trailed off, looking around for his absent friend.

"That's my fault I'm afraid. He and Kaidoh both messed up their drills. I also find myself lacking assistance. I'll help with yours if you'll help with mine," he offered.

"Che." The first-year clearly wasn't impressed with the juniors messing up their drills - though Inui had to admit it was hardly their fault - but didn't complain. Echizen sat down to do the ten prescribed sit-ups while Inui held down his knees. His hands felt enormous - they seemed to envelope the joints, and those strong, toned legs that carried Echizen so efficiently around the court suddenly felt like they were made of glass.

Inui watched detachedly as the first-year completed his sit-ups. His eyes drifted to the waist, where Echizen's shirt would bunch and then retreat as he moved, offering tantalising glimpses of pale flesh. Images and sounds from his dream the night before crept back into his consciousness. This was a troubling distraction. Did all of his peers have to deal with this sort of thing as well?

"Hey, let me up," Echizen intoned dully. Belatedly, Inui realised that in his distraction he'd failed to notice that the first-year had finished his sit-ups. Stretches next. They changed position. Inui pushed down on the freshman's shoulders as he reached for his toes.

It was just stretches. But there was still a faint air of awkwardness - that was what Inui needed to clear. He needed to make Echizen feel comfortable doing stretches with him. Feel comfortable brushing hands. Feel as comfortable with him as he did with Momoshiro and Kikumaru.

"Hey, senpai. Senpai! It's your turn," Echizen said impatiently.

"Oh. Right. I'm sorry." Inui sat down to do his own sit-ups.

"Che, what's up with you senpai? Your head has been in the clouds all day."

It took Inui a moment to remember to respond. Those small hands gripping his knees... it seemed as though Echizen wasn't the only one who needed to become accustomed to some sort of contact.
"Just data. Very interesting data."

It might be progress, but he still had a long way to go.

Notebook 6

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 6

Inui was satisfied with his current rate of progress - Echizen didn't react to a brief shoulder pat or brush of the fingers anymore, and he'd also recorded a decrease of 30 percent in the freshman's radius of personal space when it came to him. It might not have sounded like much, but considering the radius used to be 1.5 metres, it was a big step. They were hardly affectionate, but things were now comfortable enough to proceed.

The only problem was that Inui wasn't quite certain of where to proceed to next.

Which was why he was currently sitting in his bedroom, magazines spread out around him and pencil tucked behind his ear.

"How to make him notice you'... no longer relevant. 'Is he really that into you?'," Inui murmured to himself, then paused and filled in the quiz. Five percent, which brought his average from the week's quizzes so far up to 3.5. He skipped past the fashion section, and lingered briefly on the letters section, but none of the week's anecdotes provided any new wisdom for him to harvest. He closed that magazine and moved on to the next one.

"Signs that he likes you'." Inui started to fill in the multiple choice quiz again, then paused, considering. What if he were to reverse it?

He flipped to the answer key, copying down the optimal responses, then leant back and considered what he'd learned. How could he

apply these signs?

"His friends all know about you." Useless - all of his friends were already acquainted with Echizen. "He gives you gifts and does you favours." He'd already ruled out the gift-giving approach after witnessing the heartbreak of so many girls, but he'd been covering the favours part quite thoroughly. "He asks whether you're single." Couldn't use that one either, as he already knew the answer, and even if he didn't Echizen would just presume he was gathering data as usual. "Remembers a lot of trivial facts about you, such as your favourite colour or food or band."

Inui paused, and a gleam entered his eye. *This* . Finally. Something that he couldn't be beaten at!

It was time to get back to basics.

When he first began his venture, Inui had gathered a great deal of empirical data on Echizen, but he'd never been able to get very far when it came to more emotional matters such as personal taste and preferences - even Momoshiro wasn't able to give him much when asked. He'd been collecting slivers over the past few weeks - he now knew the freshman's usual order at McDonalds, his favourite subjects, and that his preferred choice of grip tape was not the one Inui had written down because it was usually sold out - but there were still large gaps in his knowledge. Gaps that needed to be filled.

So the next day found him discreetly trailing Echizen and Momoshiro as they left McDonalds.

"And then she had the nerve to say she was going to tell her brother! Right in front of Kamio!"

"Hnnn."

"I just don't get women. Are they all like this? What do you think, Echizen?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Oi, are you even listening?"

"Sure, Momo-senpai. You were flirting with Tachibana's little sister, and she embarrassed you in front of the whole of Fudomine High's tennis team."

Momoshiro spluttered. "It was not flirting!"

Echizen didn't comment. Inui carefully weaved his way past a small crowd of elementary school children, just barely keeping the pair in earshot.

"Well, okay, maybe it was... but can you blame me? Don't you think she's cute?"

"Not particularly."

Momoshiro actually seemed more cheered by the statement than offended. "So what type of girl *do* you like?"

"Haven't really thought about it." Echizen yawned.

"Not at all?!" the junior power player squawked.

The first-year considered it for a moment. "I don't like long hair," he offered.

"That doesn't mean anything!"

Truly, this remained the best way to collect data. Inui's pen was scribbling so fast he hoped that he would actually be able to read his notes later.

"... She'd have to like tennis?" he added. He sounded bored of the discussion.

"But you said you don't like An!" Momoshiro pointed out.

"I don't," Echizen agreed.

"But she's the only girl I can think of that has both short hair and likes tennis!"

Echizen just shrugged. They stopped by a vending machine, and the first year bought a can of Ponta.

"Ah, forget it," the junior dismissed, then stretched. "Man, practice was a killer today. Want to skip the street courts this time?"

Echizen smirked. "Haven't been keeping up with your training schedule?"

"Who could? That Inui must be trying to kill us!"

"Hmmm."

Momoshiro paused at the lack of agreement from his friend. "Eh? Something on your mind?"

"Just that Inui-senpai has been acting weird," he stated blandly.

The tall power player laughed at that statement. "Inui-senpai has always been weird!"

The freshman didn't bother responding. Inui made another note in his journal. Momoshiro would definitely be trying out his new batch of Inui Super Special Ultimate Juice Max next practice.

"I mean, he's always muttering about his data and asking all sorts of questions and stalking everyone. He was even asking me what your favourite colour was the other day," the junior continued, oblivious to the growing dark presence just out of their sight. "And those weird juices of his!" He shivered for dramatic effect.

"Hn. They are pretty disgusting," Echizen agreed distractedly.

Inui wasn't certain whether he should be more offended at the candid dismissal of his health drinks - they were for their own good, and provided many vitamins and nutrients that would promote healthy growth and an increase in stamina! - or at the accusation of stalking.

Although... what was he doing right now?

Inui's pen stilled. It wasn't something that had ever bothered him before, but he suddenly felt slightly uncomfortable invading Echizen's privacy in such a fashion. True, he was collecting a great deal of highly valuable data, but none of it was really related to tennis. Was it okay to collect personal data like this?

When did it stop being data gathering, and become outright stalking?

It was bad enough that near nightly he invaded the freshman's privacy in his own imagination.

"I don't know how Fuji-senpai drinks it and says he *likes* it."

Echizen didn't comment.

"Hey, speaking of Fuji-senpai, you know his brother? Last time An and I were at the street courts..."

Inui closed the notebook, and let the two of them walk out of sight as Momoshiro continued his monologue.

He wasn't comfortable collecting data this way in regards to Echizen. This wasn't his usual sort of project. This was a personal endeavour. And he hadn't even considered what might happen to his percentages if he was caught! It could very easily undo all the progress he'd made thus far.

The data-gatherer turned on his heel and started to head home. It would be more meaningful if he collected the data without resorting to stalking, he concluded. It would be a new challenge.

Quite frankly, Inui was looking forward to it.

Notebook 7

Author's Note: I suppose this chapter could count as a first date! All character data taken from 40.5.

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 7

With his personal revelation, Inui had returned to his previous methods of attempting to extract personal information from Echizen through conversation. He needed to converse with the freshman more anyway, but it did seem that most of these data-gathering expeditions would quickly wind up off-track.

"But Tezuka is prone to following that with a return to the far right," Inui pointed out. "75 percent probability."

Echizen scoffed. "Only if he's playing inside the zone. When the zone's broken, he nearly always returns a straight from that position."

"Given how rarely Tezuka is in this position when not in the zone, the sample size is not enough to draw reliable projections from."

"It's not due to habit. It's just the most comfortable way for him to return without being left off-balance," Echizen argued. "I'd make the same shot in his position."

"But such a shot is meaningless if your opponent can predict it with accuracy every time."

"Buchou wouldn't care about that. Half of his game is ensuring that he can always return the ball to the opponent's court, not how un-returnable that ball is."

Inui conceded the point. "Then how would you follow it up?"

"Do exactly the same thing. Turn it into an endurance match. If you've got better concentration, it doesn't matter, right?"

"But Tezuka is an endurance athlete. It's a match that most people would lose."

"What are you two doing?" Tezuka asked, stepping up behind them with his arms crossed.

"Nothing!" they snapped out in unison.

The captain eyed them both suspiciously, but since they hadn't been assigned anything else to do and weren't causing any sort of disturbance, he had no cause to assign laps. He cautiously continued past.

Once he was safely out of earshot, Inui added, "I suppose in that respect Kaidoh might actually be the one with the highest chance of defeating Tezuka."

"I've defeated him before."

"But you didn't turn those into endurance matches. That is a completely separate set of tactics for discussion."

"Kaidoh-senpai would lose to zero-shiki, though. He wouldn't be able to see it coming."

"But his snake has more than enough spin to counteract the Tezuka zone. The boomerang snake especially."

"Hn. Maybe if he could do the boomerang snake with his backhand - Buchou wouldn't be able to predict that."

"He's been training it."

"Really?" Echizen looked interested.

"Oh yes. Highly unreliable at the moment, but with the way Kaidoh trains, I estimate that it should be at an eighty percent success rate by the Prefecturals."

"Hmm." The freshman dwelled on that for a minute, then declared, "It still wouldn't work against the Tezuka zone. The counteracting spin would drive it into the net instead."

Inui made an annotation in his notebook. "A valid observation."

"Oiiiiii! Ochibi, Inui! What are you doing over here?" Kikumarū bounced over to them, a bundle of energy despite having just completed a match.

"And it would all be meaningless if he started using the zero-shiki serve," Echizen added.

"But Tezuka can't use that indefinitely. It puts too much strain on his arm. The Coach has already stated that he'll pull Tezuka out of a match immediately if he dares to threaten his arm again. I'm quite certain that he'll follow through with it."

"Eh? Obsessing over Tezuka's data *again*?" Kikumarū complained, crossing his arms.

"Hmmm? What about Oishi-senpai versus Kikumarū-senpai then?" Echizen asked, the faintest of smirks gracing his lips as he slanted a glance at the acrobat.

Inui grinned darkly. "Oh, that data is *very* interesting..."

Before Kikumarū had the chance to react, two sharp claps echoed from the centre of the nearest court. "Practice is over for the day!" Tezuka called out. "Regulars, don't forget your training menus!"

Everyone headed to the clubroom to change. As the club dispersed, Inui asked, "So what are you doing this afternoon?"

"Checking to make sure I'm following my training menu, senpai?" Echizen asked.

"I think your recent results speak for themselves. You're obviously getting in plenty of training outside of the usual practice."

"Hm... I normally go the arcade with Momo-senpai on Fridays, but he has to look after his sisters."

"Sorry Echizen!" Momoshiro waved and ducked his head in apology as he dashed out the door. He was obviously already running late.

"Che." A pair of considering hazel eyes turned to him next. "What about you, Inui-senpai? Want to come instead?"

The offer caught the senior by surprise. "I... haven't been for a long time," he confessed. Inui didn't have much time for games. He played them very casually on his computer every now and again, but at some point studies became more important and the pastime was pushed to the side.

Echizen raised his eyebrows. "Really? Then senpai definitely has to come."

"... Alright," he agreed. Despite his hesitation, he was privately elated. It was the first time Echizen had ever - however obliquely - *invited* him somewhere himself. Until now, it had always been Inui who made the suggestions. He was even more pleased when it didn't look like anyone else would be accompanying them.

As soon as they arrived, Echizen plonked himself down in front of a fighting game. The senior was not at all surprised that the first-year would choose a competitive game instead of a co-operative one. He just watched to begin with, and then hesitantly added a token to the next machine.

To his surprise, he won. Echizen looked surprised too. "Che, beginner's luck."

"Shall we play again?"

They did. He won that round too. They headed over to some driving games next. Inui lost the first race as he adjusted to the controls, but won the second, and then the third. It was quite enjoyable, perfecting the turns and speed and angles in order to achieve the shortest lap time. The physics were not perfect, but realistic enough for him to calculate the effect his speed and momentum would have on his turns.

They moved on to a different fighter after that. Inui might not have been to the arcade for many years - probably not since his freshman year in middle school - but he was quite talented with computers, and rather skilled at pattern recognition. He won that round as well.

Echizen scowled, and pushed another token into the machine. Inui smiled.

They wound up staying at the arcade a good hour longer than intended, as Echizen challenged him again and again. The freshman won several times, but was not satisfied with merely snatching victories from his senpai's mistakes. Inui did briefly contemplate throwing the occasional game, but given Echizen's personality doubted that he'd be able to get away with it, and such an action would only hurt his reputation.

In any case, the freshman seemed to be enjoying himself, much in the same way he did whenever he found a worthy opponent in tennis. Inui admitted that he was having fun too. Really, it was quite a shame he didn't seem to have the time to indulge in this pastime as frequently anymore.

"I'm rather thirsty after that. Want to get a drink?" he offered as they left the arcade.

Echizen nodded mutely, and they stopped by a vending machine to purchase some drinks. Inui chose Calpis, and was slightly perplexed by the freshman's expression of approval. He didn't ask, and instead wondered out loud about the performance of the other regulars at the arcade, and whether Kikumaru's excellent kinetic vision would be an advantage in shooters.

For his part, Echizen just sat quietly, making the odd comment or correcting the senior's misguided assumptions. It wasn't until Inui paused to take several gulps of his drink that he finally spoke up.

"You talk a lot, senpai, but you never really talk about yourself."

Inui nearly choked, hastily recapping his drink. "Pardon?"

"You know everyone else's hobbies and backgrounds and blood types, but you never talk about your own. It's unfair."

It wasn't something he'd ever considered before, but supposed it was true. "It's not a secret. I guess it's just that nobody ever really asks."

The freshman hummed at that, and then prompted, "So?"

Caught off-guard, Inui racked his brain for something his kouhai might find relevant. "Hmm... I attended Midorigawa Dai-ichi Elementary School, and then Seigaku middle school, as you know. I like Korean movies. In addition to tennis, I also do rather well at Chess, Go and Othello."

Echizen smirked. "Che. Figures."

"What about you?" Inui asked.

Echizen rolled his eyes and hopped off the park bench, tossing his empty can in the bin as he did so. "You already know, senpai."

It was true, of course. He knew that Echizen's favourite type of music was J-pop, that he attended Los Angeles Saint Youth Elementary

before moving to Japan, and that he got along well with animals; and that was just the beginning. He had an entire notebook dedicated the freshman, and he still didn't know everything. He was starting to doubt that he ever would.

The sun was setting - it became late without him even noticing. "It's getting dark. I should probably get going. Thanks for inviting me," the senior said as they prepared to head their separate ways.

Echizen regarded him briefly, and then tugged on his white cap. "Che, your company's not so bad, senpai." He turned and headed home, throwing a lazy wave over his shoulder. "See you tomorrow."

From Ryoma, that was tantamount to saying they were friends.

Inui managed to contain himself until Echizen was out of sight before whipping out his notebook and scribbling notes down furiously.

Notebook 8

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 8

Inui had frequently wondered how long it would take someone else on the team to notice what he was doing. He expected Fuji to be the first, but to his surprise it turned out to be Kaidoh.

"Oi, senpai," came the quiet comment after doubles training one day. "What exactly are your intentions towards the brat?"

To say he wasn't caught off-guard at the forthright comment would have been a lie. However, it didn't take long to deduce his doubles partner's line of reasoning.

"I assure you that this is no experiment, but the result of long and careful consideration. I have no intention of upsetting the team's dynamics."

Kaidoh relaxed, but only marginally. Inui had forgotten that the junior's stringent beliefs in the senpai/kouhai relationship went both ways. It was actually rather touching that the Viper was looking out for Echizen in his own offhanded way. "The brat's thick-headed when it comes to anything but tennis, you know. Don't be surprised if he acts badly when he figures out what you're doing."

"Thank you for the warning."

The junior just hissed and headed back towards the clubhouse. Inui opened his book and made a quick note. Kaidoh was not a threat to his plans.

It had been a week since that breakthrough trip to the arcade, and Inui was once more at a loss. Every magazine he'd consulted suggested that his next step was to confess, but all of the data still pointed to a flat-out rejection at this stage of affairs. Echizen might regard him as a friend more so than a senpai now - an enormous achievement in itself - but he still didn't show a single sign of considering him in any sort of romantic light. It was a wall the senior didn't know how to breach.

He'd tried to up the ante by flirting, but any double-entendres seemed to fly straight over the freshman's head. None of the traditional romantic approaches would work either. There was a ninety percent chance that any flowers he gave would wind up in the bin. An eighty percent chance that any chocolate would be eaten by Momoshiro. A seventy percent chance that a gift wouldn't even have the nametag read before it was carelessly disposed of. Inui had observed Echizen throwing away the little tokens adoring girls would leave in his shoe locker as recently as two weeks ago. It was actually quite amazing that there were any girls left still willing to try.

"Kaidoh, wait up," Inui beseeched, jogging lightly to catch up.

"Fsssshuuu, what do you want, senpai?"

"It's slightly embarrassing, but I was hoping for some... advice." It was one of the things Inui had been avoiding from the very beginning. The whole exercise began due to his dissatisfaction at being what Oishi termed 'a late bloomer', and having to outwardly acknowledge his inexperience left a salty taste in his mouth. But he truly needed an outside opinion - he was much too close to be sure of his ability to make objective decisions. Logically the best sources of advice would be Oishi or Kikumaru - who already had an established romantic relationship - or Fuji, who was unquestionably the team powerhouse on the romance front. But Inui knew Kaidoh wasn't the sort to gossip, and that was much more important at this juncture.

"About the brat?"

"Correct."

Kaidoh folded his arms. "You seem to be doing fine on your own, senpai."

"I... am at a loss of how to proceed," Inui confessed. "The results of my research and the conclusions of my data are at odds."

"Your... data?" Kaidoh seemed perplexed.

"That's right." He withdrew the notebook he'd dedicated to the endeavour. It was now by far the thickest notebook he'd ever carried, though its size was greatly magnified by the numerous magazine clippings and book passages copied into its pages - data on Echizen himself probably only counted for a scant third of it.

"All that?" Kaidoh was staring at the notebook with wide eyes and a slightly alarmed expression.

"You see why I need a second opinion. I feel like my approach might be off base. While Echizen has warmed up to me significantly, I don't think he's... as you said, he's a little oblivious when it comes to matters of a romantic nature. I've tried to bring the matter up, but..."

"Bring it up? How?" The junior popped the lid off his water bottle and took a swig, still warily eyeing the hefty tome.

"You know, the usual. Flirting. Pick-up lines," Inui stated in a business-like manner, and diplomatically didn't comment when Kaidoh choked on his water.

"What sort of pick-up lines?" he coughed.

"Let's see... 'Do you sleep on your stomach? Can I?' And there was also 'If I wrote the alphabet, I would put U and I together.' Unfortunately, he just looked confused and changed the subject. And then there was, 'How much milk have you been drinking?', but when he said 'two glasses a day' I realised that perhaps-"

The second year was staring at him like he was insane. "Senpai... where did you find those lines?"

"The internet. It's a wonderful resource. If you like, I could give you the link-"

"No thanks," Kaidoh interrupted. "It's just..."

"Yes?"

The second year seemed indecisive. Inui waited patiently while he thought things out.

"... It's just that those lines are pretty terrible, senpai."

The senior was stricken. "But the testimonials-"

"Either way, the brat doesn't talk with words," Kaidoh continued gruffly. "He talks with tennis and actions."

Tennis and actions?

It was like being struck by lightning. Of course! All those magazines and websites had been telling him that communication was vital, and that conversations were important to relationships, but Echizen wasn't the talkative type at all. How could he have overlooked something so fundamental? He flipped open his notebook and started scribbling notes down rapidly.

"Yes... yes... naturally, why didn't I consider...? A thirty-five, no, thirty-seven percent chance..." Belatedly, he realised that Kaidoh was still there. "Oh, I shouldn't keep you any longer. Your training regime is quite time-consuming isn't it? And midterms are coming up as well. I should be heading home too."

"That's all?" The junior's expression didn't change, but Inui knew him well enough by now to detect the faint surprise in his voice.

"Yes. Thank you, Kaidoh. You've been most helpful."

Kaidoh hissed at that, but didn't bother properly vocalising his thoughts. He hoisted his racquet bag over his shoulder and stuck his hands in his pockets. However, he paused before heading off.

"Oi, senpai. One more thing."

Inui paused in his scribbling and adjusted his glasses. "Yes?"

"For something like this. You shouldn't rely on your data so much." His piece said, Kaidoh walked away; shoulders hunched, and hissing softly.

Ridiculous. He understood the wisdom in keeping his data gathering strictly above the level, but how was he supposed to achieve such impossible objectives *without* his data? Kaidoh meant well, but he didn't fully understand the enormity of the undertaking. There was far too much information to be managed. How *else* could he guarantee success?

That said, it turned out to be an excellent idea to discuss the matter with his underclassman. Kaidoh was hardly the most sociable of the Regulars, but his insight into Echizen's character had put him back on the right path.

The data gatherer walked home in deep thought, turning over everything he'd learned in his head. Words held little weight with Echizen. Tennis was out of the question. He needed something else. Some sort of gesture. Something other than the flowers and chocolates and gifts that the girls always failed at securing his attention with. Something that only he could do to demonstrate his feelings in a way that Echizen would recognise.

He arrived home and went straight to the refrigerator, intent on getting some refreshments so he could work on his plans and brainstorm upstairs for the rest of the afternoon. He was all out of juice, so automatically set about preparing a new batch.

That was when it struck him. The perfect idea.

Inui stared at the ingredients laid out in front of him.

The task was slightly daunting.

He had to make a juice for Echizen that tasted good.

Notebook 9

Author's Note: Hmm, this chapter is unusually short compared to the others. Also, there are certain sentences within, which if you giggle at them, indicate that you are too far gone to be saved. :)

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 9

Inui anxiously awaited afternoon practice. The moment was here. His big chance at progress. He was finally ready.

He'd spent *days* researching and experimenting. There had been 35 complete failures, and he'd needed to purchase three new blenders. Batches 36 to 45 were the first that were ingestible, but still far too salty. Batches 46 to 50 were too watery. Batches 51 to 54 were pulpy and turned to jelly if left sitting for too long. Batches 55 and 56 fermented and exploded overnight. But Inui felt pretty good about number 57.

Though to be honest, he was still rather nervous. Inui couldn't trust his own sense of taste. He'd compared it to a variety of grape-flavoured drinks as well as the whole range of Ponta, but no one ever seemed to agree with him in matters of taste, and nobody was willing to perform the tests for him. Except for Fuji, but he didn't particularly want Fuji to be privy to details of his plans.

Regardless, he was about 65 percent certain that batch 57 was perfect. Maintaining a pleasant, sweet taste and a smooth milky texture while still containing an excellent cocktail of vitamins and ingredients guaranteed to improve health and stamina. It was

sweeter than he personally preferred, but he wasn't the one the juice was for. There was also more fructose than he liked, but he wrote it off as an energy boost.

Yes, this was the one. This was a juice that tasted good... probably.

The bell trilled, and classes were over for the day. Inui kept his stride measured and his pace as normal as possible on his way to afternoon practice.

Now that he finally had what he hoped was the perfect juice for Echizen, he had to find some way of actually *giving* it to the freshman. He couldn't just offer - he'd be turned down flat. Luckily, he was still in charge of creating the regulars' training menu each practice.

It was time for some power drills.

One nice thing about high school was the slightly better equipment. The club even had a ball feeder. And since Inui designed the drill, he was conveniently the one in charge of running it.

Momoshiro, Oishi, Kaidoh and Tezuka all passed easily. Inui knew they would. Kikumarū failed. Inui handed over the juice. The acrobat ran for the water fountain so fast that it looked like there were two of him. That took care of the last of the Super Deluxe Penal Tea. Inui brought out Batch 57.

Fuji also failed his drill, and took his drink with a smile. His smile became an expression of confusion when he handed back the empty cup. "Interesting." Nobody blinked an eye. Fuji's bizarre sense of taste was the stuff of legend.

Finally it was Echizen's turn. Inui was a little worried about this part, because Echizen had a terrible habit of surprising them all with the amount of power his comparatively small body could produce.

His concern was unfounded. Kikumaru returned from the fountain, grey-faced and complaining loudly. The distraction combined with the speed of the launched ball - Inui took the liberty of tweaking the settings just a little at the last minute to improve the odds - was enough to mess up Echizen's return. The tennis ball thudded into the net. Personally, Inui was impressed he'd returned it at all.

Smiling, he held up the glass of purple juice. "Batch 57. My very latest creation for you. Full of nutrients that will increase your power and promote the development of strong bones and a healthy body."

The freshman stared at the drink for a long moment, horror evident on his face. Momoshiro laughed, and goaded him in the background. "Go on Echizen! What are you, chicken?!"

The jibe was effective. Echizen screwed his eyes shut, and chugged the entire cup.

There was a long pause when he finished as the other regulars - Inui included - anxiously awaited his reaction to the new beverage. This was it. The moment of truth. Would his hard work be worth it?

Echizen blinked, stared at the cup in confusion, and then glanced at the senior.

Inui held out his hand for the cup.

"What? What's going on?!" Momoshiro's jaw dropped. "Why-?"

"Everyone, practice is over for the day! You four freshmen there, clear the courts!" Tezuka barked.

"Not as good as Ponta," Echizen commented off-hand as he made his way to the court exit. "... but that juice wasn't too bad, Inui-senpai. You should make it again."

Kikumaru dashed over. "Ochibi! Did you hurt yourself?! Oishi! Come look at Ochibi! I think he hit his head!"

Echizen just smirked and headed to the clubhouse to change.

"Inui, what was that new juice?! Give it to me!"

"Eiji, are you sure-" Oishi tried to intervene, but Kikumarū had already grabbed the bottle from his hands and taken a sip of it. He paused, and then took another sip.

"Ehhh?! It tastes like that stuff Ochibi's always drinking! No fair, Inui! How come I got Penal Tea when I blew your drill?!"

"You don't like my Penal Tea?" Inui asked. "But it's so good for you."

"It's *poison* !"

"I'm only looking out for the well-being of the team."

"Eiji, let it go. We're holding up the freshmen," Oishi said.

"But Oishi!"

Inui opened his notebook and made a small note at the bottom of the page: 'Huge success'.

Although back inside the clubhouse, he very studiously avoided Fuji's curious gaze as he changed into his street clothes.

Sometimes success brought problems of its own.

Notebook 10

Author's Note: This chapter is as cliché a twist as it can get, but then, there aren't enough InuiRyo fics out there to have used up the popular clichés yet! Yay!

Only two chapters left after this one, on the home stretch now.

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 10

Inui knew that after the stunt with the juice, it was only a matter of time before Fuji would pass comment. It was something he'd been avoiding for as long as possible, but as he stepped up his campaign it was inevitable that the more observant members of the team would notice.

It wasn't that he didn't try to avoid the conversation. Conversations with Fuji were dangerous, after all - the data gatherer always found himself giving away far more information than what he received in return. He was currently assisting Tezuka in deciding the line-up for the upcoming intra-school ranking match - a tradition they'd introduced to the high school - so had been able to put it off for a number of days. But he was finally caught outside of the clubhouse when he returned to pick up his gear.

"It's really very interesting," the cheerful voice said behind him.

The data-gatherer froze, but quickly gathered his composure to turn and face his classmate. "What?"

"Your little project. I didn't expect to come across someone else who enjoys the chase as much."

Inui bristled briefly at the insinuation. "I am playing for keeps." Even if he didn't remember exactly when he'd decided that. Wasn't this supposed to just be a step in his social development?

"I didn't really think Echizen was all that fond of you. I'm surprised you're going to take the chance," Fuji said.

"He's not. But data can be changed."

"So that's the point of your crusade? How's it going?"

He didn't see the point in being vague with Fuji. "My odds have increased to 23 percent."

"That high? Saa, you have been doing good work."

It was an astronomically impressive increase, one that he was ridiculously proud of, but Inui still wasn't satisfied with the notion that his chance of success with Echizen was still among the lowest of the regulars. If he were slightly more paranoid, he'd be worried about one of his teammates beating him to it. As it stood it was getting difficult to contain his jealousy towards Tezuka, Fuji and Momoshiro, who all possessed much higher percentages.

Still, 23 percent wasn't bad. It wasn't bad at all. And there was the rather sizeable consolation that the Ryuuzaki girl's odds had dropped to an insignificant two percent. His accumulated observations had yielded an 80 percent chance that Ryoma's preferences did not lay with that particular team, even if the freshman hadn't realised it himself yet.

"Inui?" Fuji prodded.

He snapped out of his mental calculations, realising that Fuji asked a question and he had been so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't

even hear it. "I'm sorry, Fuji, what did you say again?"

"I was asking what you planned to do next."

"Oh... nothing new for a few more days at least. I am content with this rate of progression."

A complete lie, but he was willing to be patient so as not to destroy his efforts with a premature confession. The juice seemed to have at least set Echizen thinking - if the considering looks the freshman kept giving him weren't being misinterpreted - but it was necessary to give the idea some time to sink in. He gauged that the safest course of action was to wait for a special event to propel things forward again, at a time when such a confession could be expected. It was too long until Christmas Eve and he'd already missed Valentines Day - his best bet was the approaching festival.

"But aren't you worried that someone might beat you to it?"

Of course he was worried, but he'd been focusing his attention on Echizen rather than wasting precious time gathering data on potential competition. "Are you suggesting that there are others to be worried about?"

Fuji just smiled. "Oh, you know... There's that festival coming up in three weeks. I don't have anyone to go with yet. Do you happen to have any suggestions?"

Inui's pen slipped through his fingers.

It was a worst-case scenario.

"Excuse me," he mumbled, bending down to retrieve the pen. His mind was racing through countless new figures and scenarios. *How could he have been so stupid?*

Fuji had a reputation. Girl, boy, it didn't matter - his success rate was astounding. He could swap between charm and intimidation as

easily as flicking a light switch. His exotic eye colour, good looks, athleticism and high grades made him an attractive prospect to almost anyone - for a fling if not a serious relationship. He'd been worried about Fuji discovering his plans because of interference, but never did he imagine that his classmate would actually seek to *steal* Echizen away from him.

Fuji smiled serenely. "I already have someone in mind, of course. You know, I've never really had an opponent before. I wonder which one he'll prefer." Which 'he' the prodigy was referring to did not need to be explicitly stated.

Inui mentally adjusted Fuji's percentage, and then winced at the ground he had to make up. He'd originally considered Momoshiro to be his biggest threat, but the introduction of Tachibana's sister as a variable had greatly allayed his concerns there.

"Fuji, why-"

"Actually, excuse me, I think I see him now," his classmate said merrily, and jogged to catch up with the freshman who was just leaving.

Echizen stopped and eyeballed his senpai warily. Inui very nearly ran after them, but he had no means of countering Fuji's methods - indeed, anything he tried might make matters worse. It was such a delicate situation already that any disruption to the fragile equilibrium could easily destroy all of the progress he'd made so far.

He stared at his notebook, looking at the letters and numbers without actually reading them while Fuji greeted the oblivious first-year.

"Echizen. You're looking well today."

"Fuji-senpai. What do you want?"

"I was planning on going to the street courts to meet up with Yuuta, but he pulled out. I need a hitting partner. Would you like to join me instead?"

Tennis. It was so much worse than he imagined.

"Depends. Are you going to play seriously?"

"How does a one-set match with no tie-break sound?"

Echizen glanced around. He was probably looking for Tezuka to make sure he didn't see, given his disapproval of unofficial matches. "... Okay, I guess."

It was the one approach Inui couldn't take. He simply couldn't use tennis - at least, not in the traditional sense - to get closer to Echizen. It made things a great deal more difficult, because tennis ranked as one of the most important elements of Echizen's life. But his particular style of tennis wasn't one that the prodigious freshman enjoyed playing against - something which Inui had been studiously avoiding reminding his target of. The sad truth was, his whole campaign would have been a great deal easier if he favoured a different play style - training together was an excellent bonding activity, and he could have possibly even fashioned himself into a worthy rival. Something that Fuji didn't even need to work at, as Echizen already acknowledged him as a worthwhile opponent.

"Oh. Inui-senpai." Echizen stopped a few paces away, Fuji at his side. "We're going to go play some tennis at the street courts." He waited a beat.

His throat felt dry. "... I see. Have good time, then."

Echizen gave him an odd look that Inui couldn't categorise, and the pair walked on towards the school gates. Fuji gave him a winning smile over his shoulder. It felt as though his feet were rooted on the spot.

23 percent. To think that not even an hour ago, he'd considered it an achievement, a figure in comfortable excess of his original estimations. Now it felt like a lead weight around his neck, a signifier

of how much further he had to go in an impossibly short period of time.

He couldn't let it happen. But what could he do?

The data never lied.

Notebook 11

Author's Note: Second last chapter! Final chapter should go up sometime on the weekend.f

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 11

It just kept getting worse. And for the past three days, Inui had been powerless to stop it. He was outclassed. He didn't have the experience to go up against someone like Fuji - and especially not when it concerned someone as notoriously difficult as Echizen.

"Inui. Inui," Tezuka repeated patiently.

Inui blinked, snapping his attention back to the captain. "Sorry Tezuka, I was just thinking."

"The ranking matches," he prompted.

"Right." The data-gatherer adjusted his glasses and shuffled through his notebook for a moment.

Fuji and Echizen were over by the water fountain. Fuji was saying something, but it didn't look like Echizen was really listening.

"Inui."

"I think that line-up will be fine. Unless there are some dark horses we don't know about, it will be fair." At this point, he'd probably say that simply to get Tezuka to leave him alone so he could go over there and find out what was going on.

"What about Inohiko? The junior who was a regular before Echizen arrived."

"He's in the block with Momoshiro and Kikumaru. There's been a 15 percent drop in Momoshiro's performance lately - my information suggests he's been slacking again."

Tezuka nodded. "I'll post these next week then. Thank you for your help."

"It's fine," Inui replied distractedly.

"... Inui, is something the matter?"

It took him a second to remember to respond. Fuji had just placed a friendly hand on the freshman's shoulder. "... Sorry?"

Tezuka studied him, brows slightly knitted. "You've seemed preoccupied lately."

"I have been a little, yes," he admitted absently. Echizen's eyebrows rose slightly in response to something the prodigy said. Inui still couldn't find a good excuse to go over there and interrupt.

"Is it anything I can help with?"

"What?" He finally managed to drag his attention back to the captain. Was his distraction so obvious that even *Tezuka* felt compelled to offer assistance? "... You could give Fuji laps," he suggested after a moment's consideration.

That befuddled the captain briefly. "What for?" He looked mystified.

"Never mind," Inui said hurriedly. The last thing he wanted was for Tezuka to get involved too. If he were to catch wind of either his or Fuji's intentions, a ban on intra-team relationships was almost inevitable. The Golden Pair would never forgive him.

At least the captain wasn't one to press issues. He just excused himself and headed to the clubhouse, while Inui turned back around to check on what was happening while his attention was diverted.

That was when he realised that Fuji and Echizen weren't there anymore, and nearly panicked.

He took a deep breath. It was bad, certainly, but not unexpected. Fuji had been all but monopolising the freshman's attention the past few days - Inui hadn't even been able to get in a trip to the arcade or a tagalong to McDonalds. He was almost desperate enough to destroy his wallet for sushi again, but wasn't even given the opportunity to ask.

They couldn't have gone far. Inui headed back to the clubhouse, skipped the shower, and got changed in precisely 17 seconds - record time. He snatched up his racquet bag and notebook and left without remembering to say goodbye to anyone.

There was no white cap visible near the school gates - and not on any of the roads near it, either. Inui paused at an intersection and thought for a moment. There were only so many destinations they were likely to visit - he would have to rank them by their probability and visit them in turn.

He set out at a run.

Inui couldn't explain his anxiety. Perhaps it was because it had been so many days since he'd managed to exchange more than a few words with Echizen. Perhaps it was that his chances of success were being slowly chipped away with every passing day. Perhaps it was because Echizen had looked as though he wanted to talk to him at the start of practice, before the coach had separated them all into group exercises. Perhaps it was because Fuji was looking ready to take things to the next level. All he knew was that he was gripped by an irrational sense of urgency.

Two and a half hours later, he was forced to conceded defeat.

The street courts were empty. McDonalds was empty. The arcade was empty. The sports store Echizen normally frequented was empty. Kawamura Sushi was empty. Short of Echizen or Fuji's homes, there wasn't anywhere else Inui could imagine they might have gone.

He was exhausted from all the searching, and despondent at the loss of another day. The festival was coming so soon. Inui couldn't afford to delay his plans much longer. If Fuji asked first and Echizen agreed to go, it was game over, and all of his effort would be for naught. Whatever chances he had remaining would instantly become zero.

He trudged home alone, gloomily contemplating the slow downward spiral in the probabilities that he'd worked so hard to build. The sky was painted an array of stunning oranges and pinks - on a normal day it would have been an idyllic sunset, but in his current state of mind only served to sour his mood. Inui was frustrated, and couldn't see any rational solution to his problem.

Once more, he cursed his inexperience. To think that the whole affair started as an exercise in curing his 'late bloomer' status, only for that same inexperience to stymie him when it counted! It was a perfect cyclic dilemma. Any other time, he might have marvelled at the mathematical beauty of it.

He was dragging his feet past the convenience store when a flash of white caught his attention from the corner of his eye. At first he dismissed it as the flickering of the bright signs turning on as twilight began to fall, but when he heard those familiar deadpan tones his head snapped around so fast he almost got whiplash.

There, in the alcove between the convenience store and the closed stationery shop. The pair he'd been searching for all afternoon.

Echizen was leaning against the wall, Ponta in hand and looking bored. Nothing was wrong with that picture. The problem was Fuji, an arm braced against said wall, moving in. Close. *Much too close* .

"Say, Ryoma - I can call you Ryoma, right?"

Echizen was just staring at his senpai, looking perplexed but not particularly bothered. Didn't he realise what Fuji was planning? Or did he not care? Had Inui already lost? "It doesn't really matter."

Fuji's smile widened. "I suppose you're right. You know, I might have told you this before, but you really are quite amazing."

Echizen smirked. "Heh, you're not too bad yourself, senpai."

"Oh?"

The freshman shrugged with one shoulder. "It would be better if you played seriously more often, though."

"Saa, that wasn't really what I was talking about." He leaned in a little more.

"Fuji-senpai, you're too close," Echizen said impatiently.

It was the words Inui had been waiting for.

"But Ryoma-"

Fuji paused and glanced down at his wrist, caught millimetres from Echizen's thigh. Inui tightened his grip, and the prodigy winced slightly. "Inui! I didn't expect to see you here."

Echizen seemed surprised too. "Inui-senpai?" He paused, thinking. "Oh yeah. You live around here, don't you?"

Fuji should have known that too. Was he so confident that he'd already won that he would try and show off like that? Did he really expect that after all the effort Inui had put in that he'd just sit back and jealously *watch* as his classmate tried to steal Echizen away *just for the thrill of the chase* ?

What might have happened if he didn't turn up then? What did Fuji think he was doing, trying to seduce Echizen in such a seedy and *obvious* fashion?

"Inui, my wrist-"

He dropped it, and the prodigy stepped back, rubbing it briefly. "That training menu has really been paying off for you, hasn't it?"

"Fuji," Inui warned. It was the only word he felt capable of saying.

"Is something the matter?" he asked innocently.

Inui pressed his mouth into a thin line. "Nothing in my data ever suggested that you would seriously-"

"Saa, but following the data isn't any fun, is it Inui?" the prodigy commented with a smile. Echizen watched their exchange silently, eyes bright.

"Unless you can prove to me that you're-" No, not even then. Changing tack, Inui instead asked, "What were you doing?" The words were calm, certainly calmer than he felt, but he was confident that his classmate could discern the accusation in the words.

"Just before? We were talking about the fest-" Fuji's phone chose that inopportune moment to ring. Appearing delighted at the distraction, he flipped it open. "Hello?" His smile brightened, and for one moment actually looked genuine and not conniving. "Yuuta! No, I hadn't forgotten. I'm just on my way." The prodigy snapped his phone shut. "It looks like I have to be off, Ryoma, Inui. Perhaps we can continue this another time."

Not if Inui had anything to say about it.

"See you, Fuji-senpai," Echizen replied in a bored tone.

Fuji retreated with a serene expression and an airy wave. Inui didn't look away until he turned the corner and was out of sight. Only once

he was sure the prodigy was truly gone did he switch the entirety of his attention back to the freshman still leaning against the convenience store wall.

"Echizen, are you okay?"

He tilted his head. "Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Inui let out a sigh of relief, and patted the freshman's hair - more to reassure himself, as he knew that his kouhai wasn't very fond of the gesture. That was far too close. At least Echizen was oblivious. Though in this case the data-gatherer was having difficulty deciding if that was a good or bad thing. If Echizen were a little more aware Fuji might have snagged him already, but his complete *lack* of awareness presented dangers of its own.

"Hey Inui-senpai... are *you* okay?"

That was a surprise. Echizen didn't usually enquire after other people's well being. "Why do you ask?"

The freshman shrugged, not meeting his eyes. "You've just been... acting a bit weird, the last few days. Never mind." He polished off the rest of his Ponta and chucked it in the nearest trashcan.

"You're heading home?"

Golden-brown eyes checked the sky, considering. The sight briefly captivated the data gatherer. He'd missed it so much the past few days that it left him strangely emotional, seeing it again. "I guess. It looks like it's getting late."

"I'll walk you," he offered, falling into step beside the freshman.

"Weren't you on *your* way home, Inui-senpai?"

"I feel like walking a little longer. And we haven't spoken much this week. I hope you don't mind my company."

It was a flimsy excuse, especially considering that Echizen lived a decent distance in the other direction, but Inui couldn't deal with even the infinitesimally small probability that Fuji might be waiting around a corner on the freshman's route home, ready to pounce again. Even if he knew the fear was irrational - as deviant as Fuji's habits might be, he wasn't in the practice of molesting people without their consent. For more than a minute, anyway.

He revised his initial stance; he was walking the freshman *to his door*.

For his part, Echizen raised an eyebrow, but didn't protest.

They headed back under the dusky sky. Normally Inui would fill the silence with anecdotes from the past few days and an array of questions, but he wasn't much in the mood after everything that happened. He consciously kept his pace slow enough that freshman could keep up with his longer stride - 1.3 steps for Echizen's every one - but his mind was otherwise occupied with heavy matters.

All too soon, they arrived at the temple. It was almost dark. Echizen hopped up on the front step and turned around. The warm light from the house framed him, and for a second all the probabilities and percentages stopped running through Inui's head. Not much of anything was going through it at all, actually.

"This is it, senpai," Echizen said when he didn't move. After a pause, he added, somewhat begrudgingly, "Thanks for walking me home."

"It was no problem," the senior replied quickly. His heart thudded loudly in his chest. An odd time for an increase in heart rate - the walk hadn't been particularly strenuous.

The silence stretched awkwardly. Inui had the weird feeling he was supposed to do something, but didn't know what. He didn't have any data on what to do in this situation yet - it wasn't something he'd foreseen.

In the end, he just cleared his throat. "Goodnight then. Don't forget to drink your two glasses of milk before going to bed. The tryptophan should help relax you for a good night's sleep and-"

Echizen just rolled his eyes. "'Night senpai." Then headed inside and slammed the door shut behind him.

Notebook 12

Author's Note: A nice long chapter to wrap everything up. In retrospect, I could have done a lot more with this fic, but I don't think I started to really get comfortable with the pairing until well over halfway through. It was a fun challenge though, and hopefully an ice-breaker to get some more people into this pairing? Thanks to everyone who took a chance on it and reviewed.

The Probability of Dating

By Sinnatious

Notebook 12

Inui stared at the rows of figures, carefully written out on a fresh page of his notebook.

Fuji's incredibly bold actions had forced his hand. He was out of time. He couldn't delay any longer, couldn't wait for an appropriate occasion - he needed to *make* something happen, and he had to do it fast.

His chances had already dropped to 19 percent.

He averted his eyes from the ugly numbers. It didn't matter. He was going to have to take the plunge. The odds were far lower than what he was comfortable with, but he'd seen success under less favourable odds before. That was in tennis, though, and largely due to the fact that Echizen, Tezuka and Fuji all had that tendency of blowing his data out of the water in every single match they participated in.

With such a low percentage, the probability of Echizen getting spooked and running off before he even had the chance to convince

him was high. He'd have to corner him somewhere long enough to get a proper answer, rather than a knee jerk reaction.

Even then, the probability of success... It was depressing to think about.

Snapping the notebook shut, he stood and started pacing around the room. There was a knock on his door, but as absorbed in thought as he was it went unanswered. Ten minutes later when he finally recalled the noise, he opened the door to find a tray of rice balls wrapped in plastic. The hallway was already dark. He quietly retrieved the tray and munched on one. Cabbage, tomato and raw pumpkin filling. Not exactly ideal for keeping his mind alert at the late hour, but it contained an excellent array of nutrients. He'd forgotten to eat dinner. A grievous oversight in his daily diet and training regime.

It was getting ridiculous. He had to take his chances and confess, even though the percentages didn't favour him. By now, he'd become emotionally invested in the experiment. He couldn't allow it to fail without at least staging a last ditch effort, even if that last ditch effort was almost equivalent to a kamikaze dive.

What was the optimal time and place, though?

As soon as practice ended. He'd have to get Echizen away as quickly as possible, before Fuji could move in again.

The senior started making plans. He went to bed in the early hours of the morning, but still didn't feel prepared, and spent at least an hour staring at the black fabric of his eye mask. When he did sleep, all he dreamt of was failure, and those horrible, taunting numbers.

There was no morning practice - the girl's team had requested extra court time in the lead up to their own tournament - but Inui arrived to school an hour early anyway. Butterflies danced in his stomach, and classes seemed fly by at an incredible rate. He utilised his usual

breathing exercises and mental routines that sharpened his focus before an important match, but they didn't seem to help.

It was reckless. Perhaps it would simply be better to run interference against Fuji and... no, he'd made the decision. Even if the probabilities didn't favour him, even if the data suggested that patience was the best course of action, he couldn't bring himself to wait any longer.

Like that time he played against Yanagi, he had to abandon the data to get anywhere.

Everything relied on that afternoon practice. He didn't recall walking to the clubhouse or getting changed, but before he knew it he was out on the courts, dressed in his regular's jersey. Tennis balls thudded on the warm clay around him.

"Nothing good today, Inui?" Oishi asked kindly.

He blinked, perplexed by the sight of the vice-captain in front of him. "Pardon?"

Oishi gestured towards the notebook held in his hands. It was open, but the pages were completely blank. "Oh. I... I have all the data I need already."

It was a lie. He didn't have nearly enough. Not for this.

Oishi gave him a funny smile and a pat on the back before jogging over to his doubles partner. Inui watched as they shared a quick brush of hands, standing so close together that they were almost touching. It looked like they were discussing tennis strategies, but the senior had gone to some trouble to cultivate a rudimentary ability to lip-read, and could easily discern the sweet nothings they were whispering in each other's ears. It was difficult to contain what he knew was an irrational bout of jealousy. How did it occur so naturally for them? Did experience really make that much of a difference? In

his experience, hard work, research and dedication would make up the disparity, but-

"Inui!" Tezuka called. He snapped to attention; having to run laps would ruin everything. "Practice is almost over. We'll run the drill now - please set it up. Get the freshmen to help if you need it."

So soon? He wasn't nearly ready yet. "Certainly. It will only take a minute." He didn't call for the freshmen to help, though did take a moment to locate Echizen. He was busy watching Kaidoh and Momoshiro play doubles against Arabaki from class 3-C and Inohiko from 2-A. The first-year glanced up and caught his eye. He smirked across the distance, jerked his head towards the non-regulars, and mouthed, 'Mada mada dane'. Inui smiled in response, and wrote the first notes in his book for the day.

Now he was ready.

He set out the baskets with sweaty palms. His throat felt dry as he read out the playing order and rules of the drill, but an eerie sort of confidence had settled over him. The feeling was not dissimilar to the side effects he'd experienced after drinking a botched batch of Super Deluxe Penal Tea Version 2. He hoped it wasn't going to be followed by vomiting.

The drill was an exercise of average difficulty - six balls, alternatively delivered to forehand and backhand at varying speeds, to be hit into one of the three baskets set out on the court. A routine designed to develop accuracy under a variety of conditions, but at the speeds they were using and the predictable layout of the exercise, not something the current crop of regulars couldn't handle. Inui didn't want any of the others to fail it, after all. But in 11 out of 12 of the previous set ups of this nature, one regular would always strike out.

Tezuka naturally dispatched the challenge without difficulty. Oishi, Kikumarū and Kaidoh didn't have any problems either. Echizen did it with his eyes closed just because he could. Momoshiro's last shot nearly went wide, but caught the edge of the basket and bounced

safely in. "Saved!" he cheered as he went past, waving his racquet in the air. "Sorry, Inui-senpai! Doesn't look like you'll get to test your juices on anyone today!"

At that moment, a tennis ball struck the corner of the basket, and then rolled innocently along the court to bump the fence.

"Hoi, Fuji! You did that on purpose!" Kikumaru yelled

Fuji smiled serenely, as though he hadn't declared himself a rival and tried to molest the target of Inui's affection only the day before. "But I'm curious." He held out his hand expectantly, while the other regulars looked on in rapt fascination.

Fuji always did like showing off his ability to tolerate his beverages; he was much too talented to mess up such a simple drill - *any drill* - unless it was on purpose. It was a common enough occurrence; on any drills that the junior regulars passed with ease, he'd strike out for the punishment drink. The record stood at a reliable 97 percent.

But this was one rivalry that the data gatherer had already won.

The prodigy raised the cup to his lips. "So what's this one called?"

Inui grinned maliciously. "You don't remember Aozu?"

Fuji's eyes widened, but it was too late - he'd already taken the first mouthful. The cup fell from his hand, and bounced once against the court before tumbling to a stop, leaving a trail of viscous liquid behind it. The easy-going smile wavered, the blue eyes rolled up into the back of his head, and then the prodigy started to tip backwards.

"Fuji!" Kikumaru managed to catch the slight senior before he hit the ground. Oishi hovered nervously over his unconscious figure.

"Inui!" The Coach barked. "I thought I'd banned that drink from practice!"

"My apologies, sensei. I must have mixed it up with my Super Healthy Special Blend Inui Juice." He brought out a translucent dark green liquid that resembled unset jelly.

"Practice is over anyway," Tezuka said. As predicted, the captain's disdain for Fuji purposely throwing the exercise outstripped his annoyance at Inui bringing Aozu to practice. He raised his voice to address the whole club. "Everyone finish up your drills! Second years are clearing the courts today!"

"You too, Momoshiro," The Coach said sternly when the power player casually kept walking towards the exit.

The freshmen cheered while the second-years groaned. Inui quickly packed away his juices and hurried to the changing rooms after the rest of the club.

He showered and dressed in under two minutes - the edges of his hair still drooped from the droplets determinedly clinging to them. Unimportant - his hair never received any attention other than a few harsh scrubs with a towel anyway. He tugged on his shoes, expertly tied the laces twice so that they wouldn't come loose, then headed over to where Echizen was currently hunched over his own sneakers. Perfect timing. So far, everything was going according to plan.

"Echizen. Are you free this afternoon?"

The freshman glanced towards the door - Momoshiro was clearing the courts, and Fuji was still out cold. "I guess. Did you have something you wanted to do?"

"I do."

He got a curious look at that, but Echizen wasn't one to ask many questions. "Okay, just let me get my bag."

Inui's patience only lasted until they reached the clubhouse exit. He grabbed Echizen's wrist and pulled the high school freshman along behind him. "This way." Fuji would wake up eventually, and there was a chance he'd be out for blood. Inui intended to have concluded everything by the time that happened.

The first-year didn't get the chance to protest, half-running to keep up. When they were a safe couple of blocks away, he allowed himself to slow down, but didn't release the slender arm in his grasp. How Echizen could persistently return such powerful shots with such narrow wrists continued to confound him. Although thinking on it, a great number of matters relating to their youngest regular continually befuddled him.

They'd walked for approximately twelve minutes when Echizen finally spoke up. "Inui-senpai, where are we going?" He hadn't asked to be let go yet, but Inui didn't let himself get excited at that - he'd witnessed Momoshiro dragging the freshman halfway across town on his 'not-a-dates' with Tachibana An before.

It was a good question - he'd been so concerned with getting Echizen away from interfering forces that never once did he consider where to go after that. It wasn't an area they usually visited - in his efforts to avoid running into people they knew, they'd headed into a thoroughly residential area. "Please wait a moment. We're nearly there." Casting about for an appropriate destination, he spied a small, quiet park and headed there.

He stopped underneath the largest tree and finally released the freshman's wrist. The setting was far from optimal... not romantic at all. The park was half-buried in litter, and the brick walls of the public toilets were covered in graffiti. But Inui doubted Echizen would let him drag him across town again in search of a better location.

The freshman looked around, but Inui couldn't read anything from his facial expression. As much as he observed, there were times when the finer nuances of Echizen's expressions remained too subtle for him to accurately define. "What's this all about, Inui-senpai?"

Right. This was the moment. "Thank you for coming with me. It means a lot to me." No reaction. "You see I wanted to ask you..." Inui fumbled with his words. He'd written a speech in his notebook beforehand, but assumed that if this was anything like oral assignments in class, he'd be penalised for reading from a script. "You've, um, heard about the festival next week, correct? I'm not sure if it's something you really enjoy going to, even though past accounts have you attending every year and staying until the standard curfew, but I always quite enjoy going, and thought maybe if you wanted some company..." Strange, when he'd written it out, the words hadn't sounded quite so rambling.

Echizen squinted at him, flecks of gold buried amidst the brown almost glittering in the afternoon sunlight. He tilted his head to the side as if considering a very unusual cat.

"... Senpai, are you hitting on me?"

... And with that, Inui forgot the rest of what he was planning to say. He stared at the freshman for a long moment, then gripped his chin with his fingers, lifted his face upwards as far it would go, and captured the parted lips.

Even though he'd read up extensively on the subject, it was entirely on instinct - this certainly wasn't the optimum angle he'd been planning for. He felt Echizen's adam's apple bob against the edge of his palm, felt small hands grip his shirt to keep his balance. And somewhere, very distantly, he was aware of Echizen arching up on his toes, and tentatively returning the kiss.

It ranked as the most amazing experience of Inui's life, beyond even winning the Nationals. And he couldn't quite figure out why he'd waited so long. So this was what it was all about - this moment, this feeling of contentment and completion and then on top of that the dangerously rationality-degrading *sensation*...

Oh. He'd forgotten everything he'd read about breathing technique. And once he thought about it, kissing wasn't supposed to factor in to

his confession at all. Somewhat reluctantly, Inui straightened and broke contact. His hand dropped limply to his side, but his fingertips felt like they were burning. He only barely resisted the urge to check them.

Ryoma's eyelashes fluttered briefly, and there was the faintest whistle as he exhaled breathily. He rocked back on his heels, a slight flush colouring his face, then pinned his senpai with a lazy golden stare.

"So you're asking me out?" he asked flatly.

Inui fiddled nervously with his glasses. "I really can't think of any way to make my intentions more obvious."

Ryoma - when did it become Ryoma? - rolled his eyes skyward and shoved his hands into his pockets. After a moment's consideration, he said, "Okay."

At first, the data-gatherer was rather certain that he'd misheard. "Pardon?"

"I said okay. I'll go out with you." When Inui didn't respond, he poked him once in the side. "Senpai?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just... surprised."

"Why?"

"I thought... I was worried you might want to go out with Fuji instead. I thought I was considerably lower in your esteem."

The freshman returned his hands to his pockets and tilted his head to the side contemplatively.

"When he discovered my feelings, he started to court you," Inui extrapolated. "I confess that I don't have much experience in such matters - the probability of him winning-"

Ryoma's eyes lit up as though he'd just cracked a difficult shot, then his expression almost immediately morphed into a scowl. "Che, that was annoying. I wondered why Fuji-senpai suddenly started trying all that stuff. I guess he was having fun competing with you."

"Competing with me?" Perhaps he was the one who'd been naive. He'd assumed from the very beginning that Echizen was oblivious, but it was easy to forget that while the freshman was quiet, he was always watching, and often understood more than he let on.

"Un. But then it was like you just gave up. That was even more annoying."

"So then-"

"It was pretty obvious you had no clue what you were doing," he confirmed in a droll tone. "But I guess it doesn't matter. You managed to do the important things right anyway."

"When did you figure it out?" Inui asked dazedly. "I made many attempts at gauging your reactions, but the data never suggested that you were aware of them."

"I thought something was weird for a while, but honestly? Not until you made that new juice." So that had made it through. Inui made a mental note to thank Kaidoh for his advice. "I thought on it for a while, and..." Ryoma shrugged. "Sometimes you can be kind of cool, senpai, but then you always ruin it by being a nerd. You obsess over all that data, yet you're actually a pretty emotional guy. You're a walking contradiction." He folded his hands behind his head. "But I guess that's what makes you interesting. You're not so bad."

"There was still a chance you weren't even-"

"Sort of impossible not to be, after seeing my father harp on about his magazines since I was kid," Ryoma muttered under his breath sourly.

"I see." Remarkable. His fingers itched for a pen, but were caught by a sweaty hand before he could reach for his notebook. The freshman impatiently tugged him towards one of the park benches. The paint was old and peeling and the frame structurally unsound, but Inui's head was still in the clouds so he sat down without question.

"You're kinda tall senpai," the first-year explained with a huff. "And you talk too much." And then brought their lips together again.

It went a little longer this time - Inui felt a little surer of what he was doing, and the angle was much more comfortable, but compared to what he'd seen on television and from spying on the Golden Pair, it was still rather sloppy.

"The probability of you agreeing was only 20 percent," Inui remarked breathlessly after they broke apart. Perhaps he shouldn't have been so surprised, though. Ryoma did have a way of always defying his data.

The high school freshman smirked. "Data again, senpai? Che, it's not any good with this sort of thing."

"It's not as if you have any experience in the matter either-"

"Shut up," Ryoma ordered, but instead of waiting for the senior to comply occupied his mouth instead.

Ah. It made sense, then, why Kaidoh told him not to rely on his data so much, and why despite the probabilities being against him he was here now, making out with Echizen Ryoma in what might be the most unromantic setting in the prefecture. These matters were supposed to be decided by the heart, not the head. It was amazing that Ryoma already understood this; all evidence up until now suggested that the freshman had the social sensitivity of a brick.

Eventually, the cold steel reality of the creaky chair they were sitting on started to sink in. For Inui more so since Ryoma had taken the liberty of using his lap instead of the rickety park bench. They stood

up, brushing the crusted flakes of paint from their pants. "So we're officially dating?" he asked, a little tentatively.

Ryoma rolled his eyes. "How much more official can you get?" He plucked Inui's notebook out of his bag, opened a random page, wrote down a couple of lines, then snapped it shut before he could see. "There, it's in the data."

Inui took the book reverently, and flipped open to the page. He read the words - written in expert English - with a faint smile on his face. Words that Ryoma would never say out loud. "Thank you."

The freshman brushed it off, and peered up at him instead. "Hey, if we're going out now, you should let me see you without your glasses, right?"

"My glasses?" Inui touched the edge of his frames, confused. "What do my glasses have to do with anything?"

"That's the way it always goes in those dating sims, right?"

"Dating sims?" The senior was mystified.

Ryoma's face turned an interesting shade of red - something in the range of light magenta. Inui decided it was rather cute. "You know... my cousin had some and..."

Inui nodded sagely. That solved the last of the conflicts in his data. "Of course. You don't like Momoshiro being better at something than you either."

"Che. He might start getting a big head and acting like the monkey king or something." Ryoma tapped his foot impatiently. "So? Take them off." He tugged on the sleeve of Inui's shirt.

The senior just pushed his glasses against the bridge of his nose. "But 68 percent of the articles I read suggested that some mystery was vital for an exciting relationship."

"That means 32 percent don't think that," Ryoma retorted stubbornly. He reached for the glasses, but even though he'd put on some height, so long as Inui leant back a little, he couldn't quite grasp them. And it had the added benefit of the freshman stretching up against his chest in a rather pleasing manner.

Ryoma halted and eyeballed him warily. "... That smile is kinda creepy, senpai."

Inui immediately plastered a much more serious expression on his face, but the freshman just raised an eyebrow and backed away cautiously.

It was just the beginning, after all. He needed to be careful. He still had so much to learn, especially if he couldn't rely on data for it.

"Let's go somewhere else. I'll buy you a Ponta to celebrate." It had the intended effect - Ryoma perked up and was at his side again immediately, grasping his sleeve.

Maybe he couldn't rely on data for *everything* . But it certainly had its uses.

Thank you for reading!